Chauville's Secret—by David Whitelaw

"A woman put out her hand as he passed, but he shook her off with an oath."

CHAPTER XIX (Cont'd).

The Escape.

THE solicitor ordered a cab to be ready in half an hour, and, his tea finished, sat gazing out on to the stableyard of the "Crown" and listening to the sounds of it, the hissing of the ostler as he rubbed down the horse, his gutteral admonishings to the animal as he led him across the cobbles with harness hanging, jingling, and backed him between the shafts of the crazy old landau in which Robert was to make the journey to Mayfield.

Then the ostler, throwing his cap into the harness room, took down a battered silk hat from its peg, and placing it tenderly on his head, changed from ostler to coachman, and presenting himself at the open window, intimated that all was ready.

But when the express for London left the station at Mayfield, Robert Baxenter was not among the passengers, for events had happened which had considerably altered that gentleman's arrangements. At the time the train left, he was moodily pacing the High Street of the manufacturing town in the vicinity of the Post Office.

Every ten minutes or quarter of an hour he entered the ugly red brick building and inquired anxiously if a telegram had arrived for him, and at last his impatience was rewarded. He crossed over to the light that struggled in at the long, dirt-encrusted windows, and eagerly tore open the buff envelope. The message was quite short:

"Leaving Euston seven, arrive eight-thirty. SILAS."

Robert glanced up at the clock which hung in the centre of the great bare wall, and saw he had the better part of three hours in which to kick his heels in Mayfield. A warm, drizzling rain had commenced to fall, and he made his way to the comfortable inn in the market square where he had been deposited by the cab which had conveyed him from Barchester. He drew up a chair close to the old-fashioned bow window and sat looking out through its blurred panes across the deserted square. At the best of times an unattractive town, it was on this particular evening in its most cheerless mood. The factories, the tall chimney-stacks of which showed above the houses of the market place, were sending out shrill siren-shrieks to tell their workers that the hour of release had come and that they were free to attend to their personal affairs.

Below him in the street a few miserable figures shuffled past, or from the doorways of the shops opposite surveyed the weather.

A moment, and the square teemed with life, men and women, stunted and pinched, hurried past, their shoulders bent to snatch such poor shelter as shawls and sacking afforded. Their rough ironshod shoes made a not unmusical clatter on the wet cobbles.

With the coming of darkness the scene grew more than ever depressing. Little patches of blurred light flickered out from the public house across the square and the houses surrounding the Town Hall loomed a shapeless mass through the curtain of sooty rain. A clock in the neighboring street chimed dolefully seven times, and Robert, with a little shiver, rose and pulled down the blind, as though to shut out the scene of sordid squalor.

He rang and ordered a whiskey-and-soda and told himself, when he had finished it, that he felt considerably better. He would take the opportunity of writing to Stella. It was fortunate for her peace of mind and his own independence of action that the girl was that week playing in the west of England and would not be expecting to see him. Robert hoped that he would be able to see his affair with Dartin through to its conclusion without her needing to know or worry her little head about it at all. Any anxiety she may have felt when she did not receive a letter at the theatre would have been dispelled by the telegram he had sent to her on reaching Barchester that afternoon.

At 8 o'clock he ordered supper to be served in a private room in an hour, and, dropping Stella's letter in the box as he went through the hall, he left the hotel. The rain had now ceased and the streets had taken on a more cheerful appearance, and as the solicitor made his way down to the station his spirits rose accordingly.

The train from London was well up to time, and as it curved into the great junction Robert made out the figure of Silas Berwick at the window of a first-class smoker and hailed him cordially. The mere sight of his friend gave him new energy in the matter he had in hand, and he remembered the many cases in which the investigator had acted with him with almost invariable success.

Although slightly under the average height, and a little stouter than he cared to be, Silas Berwick gave one at first sight the impression of strength, an impression which grew stronger when one had time to notice the length of arm, the depth of chest, and the way the short neck sat on the square shoulders. His face, while pleasing in expression, had no pretense to good looks; the eyes were small and gray, but they shone out merrily beneath the bushy tufts of eyebrow, the heaviness of which was intensified by their being the only hair on his face.

He sprang out with a cheery salutation as he caught sight of the solicitor among the throng on the platform.

"Quick work, Baxenter—now, what's the trouble? No, I haven't any luggage—only this," and he held up his suitcase.

Robert linked his arm affectionately in Berwick's and led him to a cab, and within the half hour they were sitting down to—and doing full justice to—the excellent supper which the host of the "Three Pigeons" had prepared for them.

As they ate, the solicitor recounted the whole history of the Dartin affair. His companion listened in silence. Robert, as a man of law, was precise and he marshalled his facts plainly, and questions on the part of his hearer were not necessary. He showed him also the few scraps of burnt papers which he had rescued from the fireplace in the study at Adderbury Towers.

The narrative was interrupted by the waiter clearing the table, and when the coffee and cigars were brought in, and the men were alone again, the solicitor went on:

"I was coming on to London to consult you. I reckoned on your being a bit anxious after my letter."

"I was. I called at the office—Cantle was expecting you and sent a wire to the Towers. I waited for the reply; it was quite satisfactory, and said that you were prolonging your visit. Of course, it doesn't take much intelligence to guess who sent that reply.

Robert Baxenter nodded grimly.

"Hardly, does it? Well, I was saying, I was on my way to London when I ran across a bit of information here that altered the complexion of things a little. The cab I drove over in from Barchester put up here, and I remembered, when I saw the sign-board, that I had called here with Dartin and Haverton when we motored over to golf on Sunday.

"The 'Boots' here evidently has a fine memory and he nodded to me as I entered and, thinking that perhaps I might improve the occasion, I stopped and chatted with him for a moment. I learned that the car with the two precious rascals from the Towers had passed through the town on Monday night and had pulled up here. They had had a drink in the bar, and they had looked at the large road map in the hall, and one of them had asked how far it was to Doncaster."

"And how far is it?"

Baxenter thought for a moment.

"Seventy miles, I should say—there or thereabouts. I know the car they were using, a great six-cylinder affair; it would eat up that distance in no time. That decided me. As they went north, it seemed a waste of time for me to go south; hence my wire. I'm rather anxious to come to grips with Mr. Dartin."

The investigator nodded his approval.

"You did quite right, Baxenter; we're not far behind them now. Just touch that bell, will you, and ask that antiquated waiter to let us see a map."

And, when it was spread out on the table before them:

"Those bits of charred paper you showed me seem to point to France, don't they? I'm afraid they're useless unless further than that they show us that your man is acquainted with the French language. I expect, when he said to you that they were crossing the Channel, he wasn't far from the truth, only I should say that they altered their plans and chose the North Sea. You see here," and Berwick placed his index finger on the map, "either Goole or Hull would suit their purpose.

"Goole is only a few miles off Doncaster, and there are boats going from there to the Dutch ports continually; from any of these they could reach Paris."

"You think they've gone there, then?"

Berwick gave a little laugh and shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a shot in the dark—but it's really surprising how many fugitives make a bee line for that city. Paris and Brighton are the two places I always get into touch with as soon as possible when I am after game like Dartin. There are rookeries enough and to spare in Montmartre and the Quartier. Given a knowledge of the language, there are few better places to hide in than Paris.

"You see, it will take them a little longer, via Holland, and I'll wire through to France to-night, to a friend of mine in the police, to keep an eye on the arrivals. They won't expect anybody on their heels yet."

The two men, having seen to the sending of the telegram, sat late over their cigars, but were early astir the next morning and pursuing their inquiries in the ancient city of Doncaster. The car, by reason of its size, was not hard to trace, and they ran it to earth in the garage of the "George." The gentlemen who had left it, the proprietor of the hotel informed Baxenter, had expressed their intention of returning for it in a day or two. They had not done so.

The hours spent in Doncaster by the two men, making inquiries, had no result, and later, at Goole and at Hull, their questions received no satisfactory answer. Berwick knew that there were many of the smaller craft which crossed the North Sea which did not officially carry passengers, but he also knew that some captains did not disdain to earn a pound or two did the occasion serve. On the subject however, they were discreetly quiet.

In this way the best of two days was wasted, and Berwick began to have doubts as to whether the men they were after had really left the country. It was after midday on Friday when a reply came from Monsieur Brieux, his friend in the Paris force, stating that two arrivals by the Amsterdam train had borne some resemblance to the telegraphed details. M. Brieux added that this was strong enough to warrant his having their movements watched.

The message was vague enough, but it was sufficient to determine the movements of Baxenter and his companion. The deadlock with which they had been faced at the ports of the Humber had made them greedy for action. The telegram had been sent to the Post Office at Hull, and there was ample time to reach King's Cross in order to catch the boat train from Victoria.

Chapter XX.

At the Hotel d'Eclair.

M. BRIEUX stroked his pointed beard and looked through his pince-nez at Silas Berwick.

"Oh, yes, my friend, I was glad to get your telegram. I cannot forget how you, as you say, 'saved my bacon' over the Bonillet affair. I have ever since longed for the time when I could in some way repay the debt."

Berwick bowed.

"Yes," went on the police official, "your message came just in time; your men, or whom I think are they, arrived Friday morning—that is, yesterday. I am sorry to say that my man has let them slip him."

"Then they are lost again?" Berwick's voice showed a keen disappointment.

M. Brieux gave an expressive shrug of the shoulders.

"I did not say that, m'sieu; it is but momentary. They put up at the little Hotel d'Eclair, over near the Luxembourg. Their luggage is still there and the proprietress says they will return. We will go there together now. She is a friend of mine."

M. Brieux took his hat from the peg behind the office door and with a little bow preceded his companions down the stairs to the boulevard. A white-haired cocher drew up at the curb and soon the three men were rattling across the Place de l'Opera and over the Seine to the Quartier Latin.

The city was looking at its best, and the brilliant sunshine had brought great crowds out to take their coffee or book at the little tables outside the cafes. The chestnut trees still showed their gigantic white-spiked blossoms, and the gardens of the Luxembourg were gay with children.

The little Hotel d'Eclaid was an unpretentious middle-class hotel, situated in one of the narrow streets which straggle up from the Boulevard St. Michel to the Montparnasse district. The window contained a few dishes of fruit and bottles of wine; behind these a green curtain hid the interior of the cafe from the passersby. Half a dozen little marble-topped tables were arranged on the pavement under a green-striped awning, and a waiter was engaged in laying cloths on these and setting out the cartes-du-jour. He looked up as the fiacre drew in to the kerb, and bowed the visitors in.

They entered between the trees in big green tubs and were met by the proprietress, who, on recognizing M. Brieux, smiled her welcome. Like all Frenchwomen of her class, she was a creature of the emotions, and the visit of the distinguished policeman to her hotel evidently pleased her. There would be so much to talk of to the patrons who would soon be straggling in to take their dejeuner at the tables which showed their line of white-clothed emptiness to the back of the room between the lines of faded mirrors.

She required but little persuasion to tell all she knew of the movements of her guests. Monsieur was right—yes—they had arrived yesterday at ten o'clock; she remembered the time—yes—for was it not at that moment that Jules had broken the big soup-tureen?—ten francs it had cost at the new china shop in the Rue Richelieu.

Her guests? Ah—yes—their luggage had been delivered an hour later, and an hour after that they had left the hotel, using the door that led out into the little impasse. They had taken a bottle of wine—yes—at that table farthest from the door, but they had eaten nothing.

They had said they would return—no, monsieur, they had stated no time. Their luggage was in their room—would monsieur and his friends like to see it? And might she ask the gentlemen to take a glass of wine, just a petit verre?—no—then would they follow her?

The proprietress walked behind the counter, laden with its crockery and fruit, and selected a key from a board on which were rows of hooks containing other keys; then made her way up the dark and winding staircase to the second floor, unlocking and holding open the door for the three men to enter.

It was an ordinary room, such as one finds in hotels of this class all over Paris. A large mahogany red-curtained bed took up fully half of the polished floor, the other furniture consisting of a miniature washstand and a few chairs. A mirror, its gilt frame swathed in dingy muslin, hung on the wall opposite the door.

The window, which opened inward, looked out on to the corner, and between two houses a little glimpse of the green Luxembourg Gardens was visible.

That the late occupants did indeed intend to return was obvious, for a kit-bag and suitcase were standing in the corner by the bed. These were locked and very heavy. M. Brieux advised that they be left as they were; it would not do to tamper with them and arouse suspicion. He had put one of his assistants on to watch for the men's return—a reliable person, this time—who would also watch the door of the passage.

Madame Renier led them between the little tables to the door and bowed them out. It had been no trouble—no—she had only been too delighted to aid monsieur. The waiter—doubtless the Jules of the tureen incident—bowed also, and then M. Brieux and his companions entered the waiting fiacre and rattled away.

Baxenter and Berwick took rooms for themselves in a comfortable hotel in the Boulevard St. Michel, and during the day kept within doors. M. Brieux had promised to let them know at the earliest moment after the visitors to the Hotel d'Eclair returned. As night fell, however, and the lights of the cafes beneath them twinkled out invitingly, the restraint became irksome, and at 9 o'clock, leaving word where they were to be found, they went out on to the gaily lighted thoroughfare, and to supper at the Cafe d'Harcourt.

Perhaps there were few better places from which to watch the varied life of the Quartier than from this lively little cafe-restaurant, where the chairs and tables stand out on the boulevard, and extend round the corner and away up the Place de la Sorbonne. Before them, in a never-ending stream, the denizens of the district pass and repass—merry bands of bearded students off to their dinner at their own particular little brasserie, or on their way to the Bulier.

Their supper finished, Baxenter and Berwick sat out at a corner table enjoying the life around them and the cool air of the evening. From within the cafe the small orchestra was playing a popular waltz, and the melody reached them in little snatches, mixed with the clatter of crockery and the laughter of the diners. There was little traffic on the boulevard, save the gigantic double-decked steam-trams and taxis and fiacres bearing their patrons off to their pleasures. Beyond the railings opposite, the trees of the Gardens made a grey-green silhouette against the summer sky.

There were dark little openings over the way, too—tortuous, narrow, ill-lighted streets—and a few doors up one of these the men could see the corner windows of the Hotel d'Eclair, and they fell again to the eternal discussion on what it could be that had taken their quarry away from Paris so soon after their arrival—that was, presuming that they had left Paris.

That there was something further in the Dartigny inheritance than Robert was acquainted with was obvious. He did not think for one minute that the chest had contained enough valuables to warrant the almost Monte Cristo-like existence which Baptiste Dartin had led at Adderbury Towers.

Moreover, the man had been so reticent in speaking of his inheritance—in fact, the only time Robert remembered his mentioning it was that night at the Empire when he had presented the solicitor with the necklace, and then it was only to remark on its comparatively little value.

"What made them take that roundabout way of getting here, Berwick? They could have crossed quite safely by the ordinary route."

(Continued on Next Page)